

Review of

Amir Teicher, *Social Mendelism: Genetics and the Politics of Race in Germany, 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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In this study, Teicher argues that the rediscovery of Mendel's laws in the early twentieth century informed scientific racism and eugenics (or "racial hygiene" in Germany) much more profoundly than has been acknowledged by previous research. These notorious fields of knowledge depended heavily on Mendelism. The rediscovery of Mendel's laws of inheritance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century soon encouraged the attempts to apply these laws to the study of human beings, and to society at large. For these attempts, Teicher suggests the term 'social Mendelism', analogous social Darwinism, and argues that it "had a far-reaching impact on how Germans and Nazis thought about society, purity, national renewal and medical dangers" (5).

The study is divided into five main chapters that reconstruct, in chronological order, the re-discovery of Mendel's laws in the early twentieth century, and their appropriations, uses and abuses outside of academia and scholarly debate, culminating in the racial policies of the National Socialists. Referring to Mendel's laws became, according to Teicher, "an important political and propaganda weapon with lasting results" (7) and provided politicians and bureaucrats with the aura of scientific knowledge. It is no surprise, then, that "...Mendelian logic informed the attitude of the Nazis toward the mentally ill and how it shaped the Nazi sterilization policy" and "left a clear mark on the legislation of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, the most important anti-Jewish legislation during the Third Reich" (10).

Some of the most important representatives of scientific racism in Germany, the anthropologist Eugen Fischer and the psychiatrist Ernst Rüdin, who were both leading proponents of eugenics, promoted Mendelism in the study of human heredity early in their careers before the First World War. Anthropology and psychiatry were thus both pivotal to the definition and popularisation of social Mendelism. Eugen Fischer's study on "The Rehoboth Bastards" (1913), i.e. racially mixed people in the German colony of South-West Africa, is a prime example of these efforts. It left Fischer convinced that Mendelian laws could be fully applied to human heredity and the "cross-breeding" of different races (41-45). Around the same time, Ernst Rüdin published a treatise that advertised the applicability of Mendelian laws to the study of mental diseases, which made Mendelism an "obligatory framework" for psychiatrists. Both Fischer and Rüdin went on to become notorious as "Hitler's professors" during the Third Reich.

In the main body of the text, Teicher follows the development of social Mendelism chronologically, from the turn of the century through to the 1950s. While the study of genealogy was not particularly influenced by Mendelism, in contrast to psychiatry and (racial) anthropology, "... during the 1920s Mendelism changed its status and its function within these scientific communities." (56). It convinced scholars that not only all Europeans, but people in general were of "mixed race": "The damages of racial crossing could therefore no longer lurk in the process of hybridization itself; only specific combinations were harmful." (101) Some adherents to social Mendelism, then, assumed that a "pure race" could be re-established. Similarly, social Mendelism informed and transformed antisemitism during the interwar period, when Jews were increasingly associated with "recessivity" and recessive traits such as malignancy, deceitfulness and undetectability: "All of these features corresponded neatly to popular antisemitic stereotypes of the Jewish

deformed physique, their uncanny nature, and their incessant attempts to penetrate and subvert the German national body by camouflaging their true nature.” (116)

With the take-over of power of the National Socialist in 1933, social Mendelism became part of official German state policies. Teicher argues that Mendelian thinking was crucial for implementing the German sterilization law of 1933, and thus “paved the way toward the subsequent murder of the mentally ill” (129), but is he careful not to construct a “direct path” leading from the sterilization law to the euthanasia campaign. Hereditary blindness, deafness and Huntington’s chorea were included in German sterilization law because they were considered clear examples of “Mendelian diseases”, even though they were negligible in quantitative terms, since psychiatrists struggled to find examples of Mendelian models for psychiatric conditions. A propaganda campaign that explained the principles of human heredity based on Mendel’s laws, and its perceived consequences, accompanied the sterilization law of 1933. Such propaganda became ubiquitous during the Third Reich where Mendelism featured in school curricula, popular plays, films and public lectures. This campaign prepared for the “Mendelizing” of racial antisemitism and the introduction of the Nuremberg laws in 1935.

While Teicher focuses on the German case, he is aware that scientific racism, including social Mendelism, was not unique to Germany. Nazi Germany provided the most extreme example of this form of thinking, but its main tenets and assumptions were shared by scholars and social reformers in Europe and the USA. Therefore, social Mendelism did not disappear suddenly in 1945 with the defeat of the Third Reich, but had a long after-life, in Germany and beyond, which explains the longevity of eugenics thought and practice after 1945. German victims of the sterilization campaign of the 1930s were not considered victims of the Third Reich, and the proponents of social Mendelism were able to continue their careers in post-war West

Germany. While Teicher focuses on the political appropriations of scientific theories, he stresses that not all “scholarly work associated with, contributing to, or leading toward Nazism” (p. 13) can or should be dismissed as ‘pseudo-science’. While such a perspective is tempting and understandable, it is too simple to account for the complicated interplay between scientific knowledge, social appropriation and political implementation of social Mendelism. Teicher’s succinct study is well argued, meticulously researched and makes a major contribution to the history of scientific racism and its consequences during the Third Reich.